

Deciding Between Focus Groups and In-depth Interviews

Factors to Consider	Use Focus Groups when...	Use in-depth Interviews when...
Group interaction	interaction of respondents may stimulate a richer response or new and valuable thought.	group interaction is likely to be limited or nonproductive
Group/peer pressure	group/peer pressure will be valuable in challenging the thinking of respondents and illuminating conflicting opinions.	group/peer pressure would inhibit responses and cloud the meaning of results.
Sensitivity of subject matter	subject matter is not so sensitive that respondents will temper responses or withhold information.	subject matter is so sensitive that respondents would be unwilling to talk openly in a group.
Depth of individual responses	the topic is such that most respondents can say all that is relevant or all that they know in less than 10 minutes.	the topic is such that a greater depth of response per individual is desirable, as with complex subject matter and very knowledgeable respondents.
Data collector fatigue	it is desirable to have one individual conduct the data collection; a few groups will not create fatigue or boredom for one person.	it is possible to use numerous individuals on the project; one interviewer would become fatigued or bored conducting all interviews.
Extent of issues to be covered	the volume of issues to cover is not extensive.	a greater volume of issues must be covered.
Continuity of information	a single subject area is being examined in depth and strings of behaviors are less relevant.	it is necessary to understand how attitudes and behaviors link together on an individual basis.
Experimentation with interview guide	enough is known to establish a meaningful topic guide.	it may be necessary to develop the interview guide by altering it after each of the initial interviews.
Observation by stakeholders	it is desirable for stakeholders to hear what participants have to say.	stakeholders do not need to hear firsthand the opinions of participants.
Logistics geographically	an acceptable number of target respondents can be assembled in one location.	respondents are dispersed or not easily assembled for other reasons.
Cost and training	quick turnaround is critical, and funds are limited.	quick turnaround is not critical, and budget will permit higher cost.
Availability of qualified staff	focus group facilitators need to be able to control and manage groups.	interviewers need to be supportive and skilled listeners.

Source: *The 2002 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation*, National Science Foundation, January 2002

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